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AUTHOR Gaudino, James L.; Steele, Michael E.
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ABSTRACT

To investigate whether researchers are developing empirically-based public relations research efforts, and whether such efforts could be considered useful to public relations practitioners, a study conducted a content analysis of all articles published in "Public Relations Review" from 1977 through 1987. Articles (196 were coded in all) were examined to determine if they employed an empirical method, defined as any first-hand, direct observation of real-world events using case study, survey, experimental, and content analytic methods. To determine if articles were programmatic, the reference section of each article was examined--if an article contained one or more self-references, it was considered programmatic. Articles were also categorized according to discipline, content area (message, channel, audience, communications models, regulation, practical research methods, internal management, professionalism, education, history, and academic research methods), and level of content area (macro-analysis, management-analysis, and micro-analysis). Analysis suggested that the research was making greater use of empirical methods, but that the majority of the published work had not been programmatic nor predictive. Findings were positive concerning the emergence of a body of knowledge that might unify public relations, and analysis supported the hypothesis that public relations research published in "Public Relations Review" is making increasing use of traditional empirical methods and becoming increasingly programmatic. (Three tables of data are included, and 19 footnotes are appended.) (MM)

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IS PUBLIC RELATIONS RESEARCH PROVIDING THE UNIFIED BODY OF KNOWLEDGE NECESSARY FOR PROFESSIONAL STATUS?

by James L. Gaudino, PH.D.
Speech Communication Association
Annandale, VA
(703)750-0533

and

by Michael E. Steele
Department of Advertising
Michigan State University
East Lansing, MI 49924
(517) 355-1739

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ABSTRACT

This article reports results of a content analysis of research published in Public Relations Review. The analysis suggests that the research published in that journal is making greater use of empirical methods, but that the majority of the published work has not been programmatic nor predictive. The analysis does, however, indicate that programmatic research efforts may be forming around the published works of scholars such as Grunig and Broom and that Public Relations Review appears to be serving as a forum for the dissemination of such research.

IS PUBLIC RELATIONS RESEARCH PROVIDING THE UNIFIED BODY OF KNOWLEDGE NECESSARY FOR PROFESSIONAL STATUS?

Much has been written in the past decade concerning the evolution of public relations into a profession. One of the salient points of this discussion concerns the existence (or the lack thereof) of a unifying body of knowledge. Some scholars and practitioners have argued that the presence of such a theoretical or technical base and an educational system for its dissemination are necessary conditions for recognition as a profession[1]. Others have suggested that public relations does not have that accepted body of knowledge yet[2] and that the boundaries for it would include many research disciplines [3].

Gaudino and Vanden Bergh argue that the relationship between the public relations profession and academe is currently at a critical point [4]. That is, public relations practitioners are eager to embrace academics as a source of both theoretical and technical expertise. They suggest, however, that if the demand is not soon met, practitioners will turn elsewhere to satisfy their technical, educational and training needs. For example, they may turn to other academic disciplines (such as marketing, journalism, communication, or business) or to other practitioners (in the form of commercial trainers or newsletters).

There is evidence that such a disillusionment has or is occurring in parallel disciplines such as advertising[5] and journalism[6]. One possible reason for the gap between what practitioners want from academics and what academics provide is due to fundamental differences between research interests,

purposes, and methodologies of academic and practical research.

In 1976 and 1979, several academicians and practitioners reviewed the state-of-the-art in public relations research[7]. The results were generally negative. The relevance, theoretical base, and the typical methodologies of the research were challenged. For example, in 1979 Grunig reported that the initiation of Public Relations Review in 1975 had greatly increased the number of published public relations articles in the three years since he conducted a similar analysis in 1976. He concluded, however, that the research tended to be of inferior quality as compared to other scholarly journals[8].

In contrast to the number of articles published nearly a decade ago, a recent review of the literature produced only one empirical investigation of the current state of public relations research -- a content analysis by Broom and associates of the research published in Public Relations Review and Public Relations Journal through 1981[9].

That investigation indicated that the content of the Public Relations Journal was primarily devoted to the day-to-day practical concerns of the public relations practitioner on such topics as message strategy, media usage, and the management-planning process. Public Relations Review, on the other hand, was found to contain an equal amount of material devoted to the role of public relations in society, professional and educational concerns, and the process of conducting public relations. The majority of the research, however, was based on either theoretical or philosophical commentary or case study methodologies.

Broom and associates conclude that Public Relations Review content was not responsive to daily implementation problems faced by public relations practitioners, that it was of little help to students, and that it was generally not contributing to the body of knowledge that might unify the public relations profession.

Given the importance of the subject to the professional development of public relations, the negative report received in the past, the critical juncture faced by the public relations practice, and the lack of current data on the status of public relations research, the authors undertook a study to address two questions:

Q1. Are academic public relations researchers developing programmatic, empirically-based research programs?

Q2. If such program exist, are they of benefit to public relations practitioners and students interested in entering the profession?

HYPOTHESES

The advertising industry has and is wrestling with similar questions. In an address to the 1980 American Academy of Advertising Conference, Daniel K. Stewart pointed out that an academic discipline should be the repository of its own knowledge base and that such a body of knowledge should be built through research[10]. As Garramone, Moriarty and Steele argue, the cumulative building of knowledge is one of the basic principles of the scientific method[11]. They suggest that the accumulation of knowledge can be achieved in at least two ways: by replicating or extending the work of others or by building upon one's own work.

While both are valid methods for accumulating knowledge, Garramone, Moriarty and Steele argue for the superiority of research that builds on one's own prior efforts. The main advantage of such programmatic research is the ability to methodically refine both the conceptual and the empirical framework based on a depth and breadth of knowledge that is not obtainable from the published research efforts of others.

The same authors argue that predictive research is superior to descriptive or exploratory research, and for much the same reasons. In the case of predictive research, the investigator is forced to develop hypotheses that articulate specific relationships between constructs, specify the conditions under which they will hold, and relate those relationships to some larger theoretical framework.

The content analytic studies of Public Relations Review discussed earlier found that articles were based primarily on commentary and case study methods. The 1982 study concluded that the bulk of the research likely reflects the emergence of a young body of knowledge. Of specific interest to this paper, however, is whether, as suggested by the the scientific method, public relations research is maturing. If it is, it should increasingly include empirical studies employing cross-sectional and experimental investigations in order to test its developing theories.

In summary, previous investigation of public relations research showed it to be in an infant stage. The arguments presented above suggest that as public relations research matures and increasingly contributes to a unified body of

knowledge, it should make greater use of empirical methods, be more programmatic, and more predictive. If public relations research is to produce a body of knowledge that will be considered of use to students and practitioners, it must provide a theoretical basis for answering questions of concern to those groups as well as providing for a discussion of larger social issues. These conclusions can be re-stated as the following research hypotheses:

H1: Over time, there will be an increase in the use of empirical methods in published public relations research.

H1a: Over time there will be an increase in the use of survey and experimental methods in published public relations research.

H1b: Over time there will be a decrease in the use of case study methods in published public relations research.

H2: Over time there will be an increase in the publication of programmatic public relations research.

H2a: Over time there will be an increase in the number of self-references in published public relations research.

H2b: Over time there will be an increase in the number of references to work published in Public Relations Review.

H3: Over time there will be an increase in the publication of predictive public relations research.

H4: Over time there will be an increase in the publication of public relations research relevant to practitioner concerns.

METHOD

Articles in Public Relations Review were selected as the population to be examined, based on the stated purpose of its publisher, the Foundation for Public Relations Research and Education; to "foster, sponsor, and conduct basic research and study in the general field of public relations."[12] A content

analysis was performed on all articles published from 1977 through 1987[13].

Articles were examined to determine if they employed an empirical method. Empirical method was broadly defined as any first hand, direct observation of real-world events employing case study, survey, experimental, and content analytic methods. Each of these techniques was provided with a distinct code.

The articles were also examined to determine if they were programmatic. Following similar research efforts in marketing and advertising, the reference section of each article was examined for references to works by that specific article's author(s). The number of such references was then recorded. An article was considered programmatic if it contained one or more self-references.

While examining the reference section, all citations were categorized according to discipline. The reference code scheme included: public relations, advertising, marketing, business/management, journalism, communication, sociology, psychology, political science, public opinion, other. Each reference category also contained the subdivisions of journal, book, and other. The public relations journal reference category was further divided into specific journals: Public Relations Review, Public Relations Journal, Public Relations Quarterly, Public Relations Reporter, and O'Dwyer's Newsletter.

The level of the content area of the articles was also coded using categories suggested by previous research[14]. The categories first separated the articles according to three levels

of interest: macro-analysis, management-analysis, and micro-analysis. The boundaries of the categories are as follows:

Macro-analysis - includes those articles dealing with public relations from a social or cultural context. The articles, while perhaps of interest to practitioners, provide little or no guidance in the performance of public relations activities at either the management or technical levels.

Management-analysis - includes those articles targeted to the management of the public relations function within organizations. The articles provide guidance or assistance to persons responsible for designing, managing, or evaluating public relations programs.

Micro-analysis - includes those articles targeted to the execution of the public relations function within organizations. The articles provide guidance or assistance to persons responsible for producing the communication in the execution of public relations programs.

The articles were then categorized according to the content area of interest. The categories include:

Message - articles dealing primarily with the formation or execution of a public relations message or activity. The focus of the activity is not on the planning or evaluation of strategies, but on the execution of the message or activity.

Channel - articles dealing primarily with the attributes of or the operation of the media or channels used to deliver the public relations message or activity.

Audience - articles dealing primarily with the receivers of the public relations message or activity.

Communication models - articles dealing with the process of communication in general or combining two or more of message, channel, or audience.

Regulation - articles dealing with regulations restricting or pertaining to the management or execution of the public function.

Practical research methods - articles dealing primarily with practitioner oriented formative or evaluative research or research methods.

Internal management - articles dealing with the management of the public relations function within an organization, with the management of public relations departments or agencies, or the management of public relations staffs.

Professionalism - articles dealing with the need for, the development of, the status of, or the requirements for professionalism in public relations; ethical standards and codes of conduct; and licensing and accreditation of public relations practitioners.

Education - articles dealing with the education of practitioners or students interested in entering the public relations job market.

History - articles dealing primarily with the history of public relations for its own sake and not with developing a theoretical or supportive framework for research in one of the other topic categories.

Academic research methods - articles dealing primarily with research methods or theory building employed by academic or theory oriented research not specified in other topic categories.

Other - articles not falling within the above categories.

The articles were coded by the authors following a thorough discussion of the category definitions. To access the inter-coder agreement, 20% of the articles were coded independently by both authors and then compared. The authors were said to agree if they made identical category selections. A percent agreement was computed by dividing the number of times they agreed by the number of decisions made.

Overall, the two coders agreed on 93.2 percent of the 412 coding decisions made in the reliability check. They agreed on 100 percent of the empirical, predictive, method, and programmatic decisions. They agreed on 91.9 percent of the reference decisions (e.g., business versus marketing citations) and on 89.3 percent of content level and category decisions (e.g., professionalism versus social responsibility).

The reasoning underlying the different decisions were then discussed and found to fall into two problem areas. First, the 8.1% disagreement on the reference categories was due to

some referenced work falling into multiple categories, such as work on psychology in the business environment. In such cases, an attempt was made to code the primary target audience for the article or academic discipline from which the referenced work was generated.

The 10.7% disagreement on the level of analysis and on the content categories was due primarily to differing desires to control for type I or II error[15]. One author made decisions based on type I error with respect to hypothesis 4 while the other used type II error as a guide. Following a discussion of the low-level of maturity in the public relations field and the high level of protection against type I error provided by statistical tests, the authors decided to base coding decisions consistent with protection against type II error.

Following the discussion, the articles were recoded and agreement found to be 100%. Given the high level of the agreement found in the reliability check and the discovery of a systematic cause for the few differences, the remaining articles were then divided between the two coders and independently coded.

RESULTS

A total of 196 articles were coded, representing a census of articles published in Public Relations Review from 1977 through 1987. Of those articles, 51.0% were classified as having a macro perspective, 32.7% as having a management perspective and 16.3% as having a micro perspective. The articles were almost evenly split between bei empirical (49%) and not empirical (51%).

Of the 89 empirical articles, surveys are the most common method of study (79.8%), followed by controlled experiments (5.6%) and content analysis or combinations of methods (4.5%). Case studies represented 10.1% of the empirical articles.

Among all articles, 10.7 are predictive (explicit hypotheses) and 23.5% are programmatic (self-reference). Looking only at the 89 empirical articles, 23.6% are predictive and 51.7% are programmatic. The mean number of self-references among the empirical articles is 1.4 with a high of 11.

The topics covered by the 196 articles were rather evenly distributed across the topics (see Table 1), with a slight emphasis placed on communication models, professionalism, education, and history.

Table 1 - Topics Covered by Public Relations Review

Topic	Frequency	Percent
Message	4	2.0
Audience	2	1.0
Channel	17	8.7
Communication Models	30	15.3
Regulation	9	4.6
Practical Research	19	9.7
Internal Management	14	7.1
Social Responsibility	5	2.6
Professionalism-Ethics	23	11.7
Education	28	14.3
History	18	9.2
Academic Research Methods	1	.5
Other	26	13.3
TOTAL	196	100.0

The topic areas broken down by level of perspective and use of empirical methods are shown in Table 2. As indicated in the table, articles written from a macro perspective tend to focus on professionalism and articles dealing with audience, regulation, social responsibility, history and academic research methods tend to be non-empirical.

The test of the hypotheses were made using correlational analysis and simple regression models of the dependent variable onto the year of publication. In several cases, the dependent variable was a two-point nominal scale such as empirical/not empirical. These two-point nominal variables meet the requirements of interval scaling, justifying the use of Pearson correlation coefficients and simple, least squares regression[16]. In cases where no linear relationship was found, a Chi-Square test of dependency was performed to determine if any dependence exists between the two variables.

Table 2 - Breakdown of Level of Perspective and Empirical Code by Content Area

	LEVEL OF PERSPECTIVE			EMPIRICAL	
TOPIC	Macro	Management	Micro	No	Yes
Message			100.0	25.0	75.0
Audience	100.0			100.0	
Channel		47.1	52.9	23.5	76.5
Communication Models	20.0	60.0	20.0	56.7	43.3
Regulation	55.6	33.3	11.1	88.9	11.1
Practical Research	10.5	57.9	31.6	36.8	63.2
Internal Management		92.9	7.1	35.7	64.3
Social Responsibility	40.0	40.0	20.0	60.0	40.0
Professionalism-Ethics	87.0	8.7	4.3	47.8	52.2
Education	96.4	3.6		28.6	71.4
History	100.0			100.0	
Academic Research Methods			100.0	100.0	
Other	69.2	23.1	7.7	57.7	42.3
Total	51.0	32.7	16.3		

To test hypothesis one, that over time there will be an increase in the use of empirical methods in published public relations research, the empirical-not empirical categorization was analyzed across the ten years studied. A test for association using Pearson correlation coefficient shows a near significant relationship (r=0.17; p=0.05) and a regression[16] using the empirical code as the dependent measure failed to support the hypothesized relationship (Beta=0.08; t=1.18; p=0.24). A Chi-square test indicates a dependence between year of publication and use of empirical methods (Chi. sq. =21.0; df=10, p=.02).

An examination of the data across years (see Table 3) indicates an apparent trend in the use of empirical methods up to 1986. If 1986 and 1987 are excluded from the analysis, a

Table 3 - Breakdown of Codes by Year of Publication

	YEAR											
CODE	77	78	79	80	81	82	83	84	85	86	87	TOTAL
EMPIRICAL												
NO	11	11	12	8	7	2	9	8	6	13	13	100
YES	10	4	4	6	7	11	11	12	15	8	8	96
LEVEL OF ANALYSIS												
MACRO	9	11	9	7	8	8	9	9	10	6	14	100
MANAGEMENT	10	1	1	6	3	4	11	8	10	5	5	64
MICRO	2	3	6	1	3	1		3	1	10	2	32
PREDICT												
NO	18	15	14	14	13	10	18	18	16	19	20	175
YES	3		2		1	3	2	2	5	2	1	21
PROGRAM												
NO	16	14	14	7	10	9	19	14	15	16	16	150
YES	5	1	2	7	4	4	1	6	6	5	5	46
TOTAL	21	15	16	14	14	13	20	20	21	21	21	196

regression of the empirical code upon year of publication does show a significant, positive linear relationship (Beta=0.24; t=3.1; p=0.00).

Hypotheses 1a and 1b, that over time there will be an increase in the use of survey and experimental methods and a decrease in use of case study methods, is not supported (r=0.00; p=0.49). A probable explanation is that there is little use of case study methods across the years (see Table 3).

Hypothesis 2, that over time there will be an increase in the publication of programmatic public relations research, is not supported using correlational analysis (r=-0.08; p=0.25). A test of dependence between the dichotomous variable of programmatic/not progrmatic and year of publication is also not significant (Chi. sq.=14.09; df=10, p=0.17).

Hypothesis 2a, that over time there will be an increase in the number of self-references, is not supported (r=-0.06, p=.18). There is support for Hypothesis 2b, that the number of references to work published in Public Relations Review will increase over time (r=0.17, p=0.02). A regression of the number of citations onto the year of publication shows a significant positive relationship (Beta=0.17; t=2.48; p=0.03). The number of references to Public Relations Review as a percent of total articles cited also shows a positive linear relationship over time (Beta=0.17; t=2.14; p=0.03).

Hypothesis 3, that over time there will be an increase in the publication of predictive public relations research, is not supported (r=0.05; p=0.32). A Chi-Square test of dependence was also not significant (Chi. sq.=10.67; df=10; p=0.38).

Hypothesis 4, that there will be an over time increase in the publication of public relations research relevant to practitioner concerns, also is not supported ($r=-0.08$, $p=.235$). To test the hypothesis, the level of analysis was dichotomized as macro and management/micro perspectives. The rationale was that macro perspective research provides little guidance concerning day-to-day decision-making activities of other than an ethical or professional nature. A test of dependence between the dichotomized level of analysis and year of publication is not significant (Chi. sq.=11.48451; df=10; p=0.3210).

DISCUSSION

The two questions prompting this investigation were whether or not researchers are developing empirically-based public relations research efforts and whether or not such efforts could be considered useful to public relations practitioners. Based on a review of the relevant literature, four main hypotheses and four sub-hypotheses were generated and tested using correlational and regression analysis.

The data suggest a qualified positive position regarding the two questions. First, the data provide qualified support for the hypothesis that public relations research published in Public Relations Review is making increasing use of traditional empirical methods. The hypotheses that case study methods would give way to survey and experimentation was not supported, largely because so little true case study research was found in the volumes of Public Relations Review analyzed.

The hypothesized increase in predictive research was not supported. In actuality, relatively few of the 196 articles analyzed contained explicit hypothesized relationships between the variables or constructs of interest.

On the surface, this finding can be interpreted as a negative evaluation of the published research in that current investigations appear to be more descriptive or exploratory than predictive. The authors suggest, however, that the null finding may be the result of style rather than a lack of a predictive framework.

More specifically, the coders often noted that after reading the first section of a Public Relations Review article a hypothesis could have been stated but generally was not. In many instances, the articles would develop a rather strong argument for a relationship between variables, based either on previous research or a theoretical rationale, but would conclude with a research question or simply continue with a discussion of research methods without formally stating the nature of the expected relationship. The results and discussion sections of such papers would then not only confirm the existence of a relationship but would also detail its nature.

The hypothesized increase in programmatic research was only partially supported. Again, there is subjective evidence in support of the existence of a growing body of programmatic research published in Public Relations Review. More specifically, two streams of programmatic research appear to be emerging. The first, and most prolific is that research based on the theoretical and empirical writings of Professor James Grunig

dealing with the use of a systems theory, advocacy of two-way symmetric models, organizational frameworks, and information processing schemes[17]. The second programmatic theme is the research effort lead by Professor Glen Broom that focuses on practitioner roles and client and practitioner relationships[18]. Both were often used by other authors to develop research ideas or to support conclusions.

While the above is a subjective claim to programmatic research, it is supported by the empirical finding that the references to previous research in Public Relations Review are increasing over the years, both in terms of total references and as a percent of total articles cited. If Public Relations Review were publishing one-shot studies of no subsequent interest to researchers, the number of citations to previously published research in that journal would remain flat.

Turning attention to the content of the research, it appears that about half of the research published in Public Relations Review is of a level to be of potential interest to the day-to-day concerns of practitioners, but there has been no increase over time. The previous content analysis of Public Relations Review concluded that the articles were of little value to practitioners[19]. This study did not find much evidence to alter that statement.

In conclusion, the findings of this article are somewhat positive concerning the emergence of a body of knowledge that might unify public relations. The research published in Public Relations Review is increasingly empirical and shows signs,

albeit subjective ones, of becoming increasingly programmatic. Attention to the formality of developing and articulating explicit research hypotheses might make the published research more predictive.

A question left unanswered by this study is whether the research is of actual value to practitioners and if the emergence of the body of knowledge is growing rapidly enough to satisfy the profession's and the individual practitioner's demand for it. The answer to those questions could be answered by having practitioners evaluate the pragmatic and professional utility of samples of the articles categorized in this study. Doing so might help determine whether or not the supply is matching demand in terms of needs, speed, and distribution.

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